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Consumers' moment-to-moment processing of television commercials

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Chapter 3
Dynamic Aspects of TV Advertising

3.1 Introduction

It is argued that it is very likely that, influenced by the dynamic nature of commercials, consumers' attention and way of processing may fluctuate during the course of the commercial (e.g., Alwitt 2002; Baumgartner et al. 1997; Hazlett and Hazlett 1999; Hughes 1992; Lang 1995a; Reeves et al. 1985; Reeves and Thorson 1986; Reeves et al. 1985; VandenAbeele and MacLachlan 1994a; Young 2002). This chapter aims to show why commercials are stimuli that consist of different dynamical elements and thus motivate consumers' moment-to-moment processing of TV commercials.

Basically, print advertisements are static stimuli that consist of verbal executional aspects, such as headline and body text, visual executional elements such as the pictorial, illustrations or a combination of both such as the brand (logo) (e.g., Finn 1988; Pieters, Rosbergen and Wedel 1999; Wedel and Pieters 2000). Television commercials do not only change the nature of the executional aspects but also greatly expands the nature of executional elements by adding sound and motion. A TV commercial is a continuous stream of pictures, visual effects, graphics and sounds. Therefore, television commercials have a reflexive attention gaining capability to the viewers, also called the intrusion value (Shimp 1997). That is, commercials engage the viewer's senses and attract attention even when the viewer would prefer not to be exposed to the commercial.

3.2 Pace of information flow

As discussed by Shimp (1990), TV advertising adds an extended time capacity relative to print advertising. Therefore, TV commercials are externally paced instead of internally paced, as print ads are. That is, commercials do not allow viewers to have control over the pace of information flow in the message. A consumer reading an ad in a magazine or newspaper has the opportunity to pace him- or herself, to study points of interest, or reread an entire piece if it is desirable or helpful. A viewer of a

TV commercial has no such control. The consumer may not pay attention to the message, may switch to another channel, or even turn it off, but s/he has no control over the pace of communication, and no ability to see or hear the message again. Schramm (1973, cited in Shimp 1990) suggests that the external pacing of TV advertising may be one of the reasons why people complain more about TV advertising than newspaper advertising.

3.3 Story script

A TV commercial is implicitly or explicitly built on a story script that unfolds during its duration. Form related elements such as execution style (Gorn 1982; Park and Young 1986), creative message strategy (Laskey, Day, and Crask 1989), format categories (Pollay 1985) and dramatic determinants are structural elements of a commercial's shape that interact with content to determine its story type (Stern and Gallagher 1990). The overall format of a commercial has been systematically considered within a literary framework (Boller and Olson 1991; Deigthon 1985; Deighthon, Romer, and McQueen 1989; Scott 1994; Stern 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1991, 1994; Stern and Gallagher 1991; Wells 1989).

Table 3.1: Literary dimensions and advertising forms, proposed by Stern and Gallagher (1990)

	Theme	**Plot**	**Character**	**Tone**	**Language**
Lyric	Personal mood, feelings, emotional state	Static: spatial, descriptive	Realistic: "me"-centered	Subjective: intimate revelation to audience	Musical, melodic
Ballad	Personal: sex, violence, revenge	Narrative: single story, simple chronological progression	Realistic: "common man"	Objective: impartial teller tale	Repetitive refrain, mnemonic devices
Epic	Social: moral, educational lessons	Cyclical, several stories, complex chronological simultaneity	Idealized: status-oriented	Objective: observant reporter of detail	Formal, rich, complex

According to Stern and Gallagher (1990), five literary dimensions are relevant to advertising: 1) theme, 2) plot or action, 3) character or speaker, 4) tone and 5) language. These five dimensions are composed to three main genres in the literature taxomony, which are summarized in Table 3.1 (Stern and Gallagher 1990).

Using similar and somewhat different dimensions, Wells (1989) made a distinction between lecture and drama in TV commercials (see also Deighton, Romer and McQueen 1989). Lecture and drama are extreme points on a continuous scale constructed with plot, character, and narration as attributes that mark transitions along the scale (Deighton et al. 1989). Deighton et al. (1989) and Wells (1989) argue that as long as an interpreter stands between the events and the audience, as is the case in a lecture, we have narration. When the narrator is removed, the story becomes a drama. A drama ad allows characters to perform or show the events directly to the audience. However, Stern (1994) questions the dichotomy lecture versus drama to be based on the narrative versus nonnarrative character. She argues that no TV commercial - whether lecture or drama - can be considered non-narrated because the camera ("electronic eye") is an omnipresent narrative force, shaping the audience's perspective of the staged events by means of selectivity, order, and arrangement of details. Therefore she argues for three extreme forms of story scripts in a commercial: lecture, classical drama and vignette drama. Lecture ads have a character as narrator and the classical and vignette drama ads differ from each other in having versus not having a plot. A classical drama ad comprises a tightly structured single plot with a causal relationship, while a vignette ad comprises a loosely structured series of stories in an associational relationship.

Although the advertising literature differs in its classification of literary forms in ads, they all agree that commercials include a story, or stories, that are overtly or covertly narrated. Since TV commercials are externally paced, the story or stories unfold during exposure to the consumer. It may be, therefore, that consumers process a commercial in a dynamic way, explained in the following way: Since consumers know that commercials include a story or stories to demonstrate the product or brand in use, allow them to see and hear a product being used, to identify with the product's users and to imagine themselves using the product (Friestad and Wright 1994). TV commercials are interpreted through the narrative mode of

thought (Boller and Olson 1991; Bruner 1986, 1990). It is likely that viewers try to understand the meaning of a narrative by creating an internal model of what will happen in the narrative. Studies of how people comprehend discourse (e.g., Kintsch and van Dijk 1978) suggest that people create an internal mental model of the "big picture" first. They may use a stereotypical plot to organize events and the order in which the events are likely to occur is called a "story schema" (e.g., Mandler and Johnson 1977). This mental model of expectations what will occur in the narrative is updated by events in the narrative as they occur: Consumers' mental model of what will occur next in the commercial is updated by the events that occur during exposure to the ad. This may explain consumers' moment-to-moment processing of the ad contents that unfolds story-like during the course of the commercial.

3.4 Number of scenes

TV commercials portray a sequence of scenes that differ from each other in for example camera position, time space or setting or combination of these. The average 30-second commercial has about 13 separate camera shots during its 30-second video sequence (Rossiter and Percy 1997). An experiment by Maclachlan and Logan (1993) found that TV commercials with more than 13 shots in 30 seconds suffer from a decrement in effectiveness in terms of persuasion and recall. Hitchon and Duckler (1994) demonstrated that music video commercials with many scenes, in which a lot of things happen and are fast-moving, received higher arousal scores than their low level counterparts. However, in their study, the enjoyment of increased arousal levels was not evident in respondent ratings of pleasure caused by the commercials. Also, using brain electrical activity data, Rossiter et al. (2001) found that, confirming previous research, video scenes held on-screen for 1.5 seconds, or longer, were better recognized. Research from Lang (1990) found consumers' arousal increases after a scene change. These findings indicate that consumers' processing of TV commercials is sensitive for scene changes, the speed of scene changes and the duration of scenes.

3.5 Audio track

TV advertising adds an audio track to advertising, which usually consists of spoken words, music, or both. Many studies have shown that different forms of audio track, such as voice-overs (Whipple and McManamon 2002), (background) music (Gorn and Goldberg 1991; Hahn and Hwang 1999; Park and Young 1986; Walker and Von Gonten 1989), lyric-adapted hits and originally written music (Tom 1990), memorably rhymes, slogans and mnemonic devices (Stewart and Furse 1986) significantly influence ad effectiveness. However, these effects depend on gender (Whipple and McManamon 2002), the heaviness of the music (Walker and Von Gonten 1989), consumers' involvement (Park and Young 1986), age (Gorn and Goldberg 1991) and music familiarity (Hahn and Hwang 1999). Also, when music and visual elements are congruous (i.e., if they evoke similar meanings; Hung 2000) or information is given in the commercial (Gorn and Goldberg 1991), music helps viewers interpret these commercials. This indicates that the audio track and the visual contents have a simultaneous effect on consumers' processing of the commercial. Throughout the commercial's duration, the sound may alter of presence/ nonpresence of vice versa, form, volume level or tempo. Watt and Welch (1983, p.94) suggest that changes in the audio track, over time, may produce higher levels of attention, possibly by an "orienting response" to the visual content. In other words, consumers' attention to the commercial may be influenced by the speed in the spoken words or music. For example, a study by Holbrook and Anand (1990), not specifically related to TV advertising, indicates that the people's natural or preferred pace for music tends to exist somewhere between about 70 and 100 beats per minute. Because consumers' attention to and processing of commercials is affected by the audio track and changes in it (e.g., presence/nonpresence, form, speed, volume), we believe that consumers' attention and processing also changes during ad exposure because of the dynamics in the audio track during the course of the commercial.

3.6 Dynamics in executional advertising cues

TV commercials do not only change the character of the executional advertising cues, but also expand them (Stewart and Furse 1986). As described in the sections above, TV commercials are externally paced, add visual effects and movements, add an audio-track and other sound effects. Characteristics of print advertisement that are static of nature, such as text, the brand(-logo), pictorial and headline are subject to change in TV commercials in terms of presence, location, shape and size. Other characteristics not found in print advertisements such as sound and structural features such as cuts (unrelated scene changes), edits (related scene changes), zooms, pans and movement within the visual space of the screen (Lang 1990) also change during commercial's duration.

Stewart and Furse (1986) give an extensive overview of the (dynamical) executional features of TV commercials. Some illustrative dynamical commercial features are commercial length, counting features of the brand element during exposure to the commercial (Mueller and Walk 1993; e.g.,: 1) Is brand presented in a particular scene?, 2) Is the brand visually presented or mentioned in the audio track?, 3) How many times is the brand mentioned during commercial duration?, 4) How many seconds does it last till the brand is introduced for the first time?, 5) How many seconds is the brand shown on the screen during commercial duration?, 6) Is the brand visible as the commercial end? (visual or auditory sign off)), the use of different visual and/or auditory devices, whether the first scenes create suspense and whether the commercial ends with a joke and the commercial format (see further Stewart and Furse 1986).

Because the brand is the key identifier of a commercial, many studies have investigated the effect of dynamic brand features on ad effectiveness. For example, Stewart and Furse (1986) showed that the sooner the brand name in a commercial is identified, the more positive the commercial is related to correct brand name recall, and comprehension and persuasion (see also Stanton and Burke 1998; Stewart and Koslow 1989; Walker and Von Gonten 1989). On the other hand, Fazio et al. (1992), showed, for new brands, higher correct brand name recall and stronger category - brand

association for commercials in which the first brand identification was delayed to the end of the commercial. Stout and Burda (1989) found that a commercial in which the advertised brand appears on the TV screen for an extended period of time, increases correct brand name and contents recall and recognition for commercials seen in normal speed, but also for commercials seen in "zipped" (fast-forwarded) speed. Investigating the presence of suspense-related executional cues in commercials, Alwitt (2002) found indirect support that suspenseful commercials heighten consumers' attention. Examining a very different dynamical aspect of commercials, namely scene edits, Lang et al. (2000) showed that as the number of edits in a commercial increases, attention paid to the commercial increases. Because executional cues differ from character and change across commercial fragments and previous studies show that they influence consumers' attention to and processing of the commercial, it is also believed that differences and the dynamics in executional cues change consumers' attention and processing *during* commercial duration.

3.7 Dynamics in consumers' responses

TV commercials can be distinguished, based on their ability to evoke entertainment, warmth and generate excitement by the use of, for example, aesthetic, artistic, emotional and beauty appeals or on their ability to increase cognitive processing by the use of for example product information, rational and factual appeals (e.g., Batra and Ray 1986; Olney et al. 1991; Puto and Wells 1984; Stewart and Furse 1986). These appeals, and the consumers' responses to them, may rapidly change during exposure. For example, with some commercials, advertisers have the intention to first communicate a sober note, to build to a pitch of excitement over time and fun to increase positive affective responses and gradually to ease off into product claims and brand name, to stimulate cognitive processing. With others, advertisers only intend to give information about the product to stimulate deep cognitive processing, and throughout the commercial affective responses are maintained on a low level.

Affective and cognitive consumers' responses to the ad contents result from the interaction of consumers and commercials (Edell and Burke 1986). There are theoretical grounds to expect that evoked affective and cognitive

reactions to an individual commercial may demonstrate reasonable consensus across consumers (Weiner 1992). Mental responses depend on the interpretation, meaning, or appraisal of an event, such as a TV commercial. Affective and cognitive responses to a particular commercial result from the interaction of consumers with that ad and therefore, this ad may generate relatively homogeneous responses across consumers. The consensus in consumers' responses to advertising is also empirically shown in several studies (e.g., Batra and Ray 1986; Olney et al. 1991; Russo and Stephens 2001; Zeitlin and Westwood 1986).

On the other hand, experienced affective and cognitive responses during commercial exposure may differ between consumers because of individual differences (e.g., Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer 1999; Edell and Burke 1987; Stout, Homer, and Liu 1990). Several studies have shown that commercials are able to evoke fluctuating affective and cognitive processing during exposure, which influences overall ad effectiveness (e.g., Aaker, Stayman and Hagerty 1986; Alwitt, Benet, and Pitts 1993; Appel, Weinstein, and Weinstein 1979; Baumgartner et al. 1997; Hughes 1992; Kohan 1968; Polsfuss and Hess 1991; Rossiter et al. 2001; Rothschild and Hyun 1990; Rothschild et al. 1988; Stayman and Aaker 1993; VandenAbeele and MacLachlan 1994a; Young 2002). These studies show that consumers' affective and cognitive processing of a commercial change across the different moments in the commercial (see also Table 4.5). In previous studies, different instruments are used to measure fluctuations in different consumers' responses during exposure to commercials. These responses and data collection instruments are extensively discussed in Chapter 4.

3.8 Concluding remarks

The previous sections demonstrated that TV commercials are complex dynamic stimuli that determine the pace of information flow to consumers. TV commercials have two different modalities, video and audio, to provide information and show different scenes consisting of many different elements that may alter rapidly during commercial duration. Commercials are built on different particular story scripts that may stimulate moment-to-

moment processing of a commercial and may update consumers' "mental" model to what is going to occur next in the commercial.

This chapter presented results of many studies revealing that these dynamic features significantly influence overall measures of ad effectiveness, such as persuasion, comprehension and recall. However, as this chapter showed, the dynamic elements of commercials change rapidly during commercial duration in terms of, for example, presence/ nonpresence, location, size, frequency, volume, camera position and evoked emotions. We may, therefore, hypothesize that *ad contents and evoked responses influence consumers' moment-to-moment processing during exposure to a TV commercial*. Several studies found support for this. For example, VandenAbeele and Maclachlan (1994a) showed that different emotional-inducing properties of commercial (e.g., music, bodily movement, emotional experience) in a single 3-second ad fragment increased evoked warmth feelings at the same moment. Hazlett and Hazlett (1999) revealed that emotion-congruent events in a commercial simultaneously generated specific emotional expressions on consumers' faces. Studies by Rothschild and colleagues (Rothschild et al. 1986; Rothschild et al. 1988) showed that consumers' brain wave activity rapidly creased as an easily identifiable change in ad contents occurred. Also, Young (2002) found increased brain activity during commercial moments in which ad contents taught the consumer about the brand. Then, these and other, studies found evidence that consumers' moment-to-moment processing, during commercial exposure, significantly affects overall ad effectives (see also Table 4.5).

However, our understanding of how moment-to-moment commercial properties and their evoked responses (see Section 3.7), separately, or interactively, influence consumers' moment-to-moment attention to, moment-to-moment processing of, and their decision to stop watching a commercial at a particular time point is lacking. Because ad content and intended consumer responses to it is under direct managerial control and they influence consumers' processing of TV commercials, this understanding is also of highly practical relevance. With this understanding and applying alternative methodologies, advertisers may alter different commercial properties and intended consumer responses to them of the commercial, separately or simultaneously, to positively influence consumers' moment-to-moment attention and ad processing at the same moment, which may then positively influence consumers' viewing behavior

and/or overall ad effectiveness. Theories from psychology and previous studies that investigated moment-to-moment consumers' reactions to TV commercials may help us in developing an understanding of the influence of moment-to-moment ad contents and intended responses on moment-to-moment consumers' processing of commercials and their overall responses to them. These theories and studies are described in the next chapter.